Typology And Allegory

A Pedagogical Introduction

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Typology And Allegory

A Pedagogical Introduction

Dr. Saneesh Cherian & Dr. Johnson C. Philip

'Type' is a word used frequently among Christians of evangelical persuasion. Many preachers take pride in the so-called typological messages they deliver, because often they are able to mesmerize their listeners through these "profound" and mystical messages.

What the preachers as well as the audience often fail to notice is that what we hear in the name of typology is often allegory. Further, most of them fail to understand that for the sake of fascinating the audience, many of these preachers trespass all biblical norms and boundaries of interpretation, and thus what lures people to these preachers is not the biblical content but rather the mesmeric power of verbal manipulation. What is more, many non-Christian speakers are able to use the same passages to come to more fancy methods that would touch any heart. Thus there is something seriously wrong with typology-turned-allegory.

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What Is Typology: The Scripture contains many types of usages and methods of communication and a Type is one among them. It comes from the Greek word TUPOS which denotes an imprint, a mark, or a form. This word occurs 16 times in the Greek New Testament and is translated in many ways into English. In the KJV it is translated seven times as "example" (1 Corinthians 10:6,11; Philippians 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:7; 2 Thessalonians 3:9; 1 Timothy 4:12; 1 Peter 5:3), twice as "print" (John 20:25), twice as "figure" (Acts 7:43; Romans 5:14), twice as "pattern" (Titus 2:7; Hebrews 8:5), once as "fashion" (Acts 7:44), once as "manner" (Acts 23:25), and once as "form" (Romans 6:17). What is common among all these usages and translations is the common idea of "likeness" or "similarity".

In other words, the word Tupos or Type is used to denote New Testament truths that are represented or depicted by Old Testament individuals, events, things, or Old Testament history. For example, Jonah who was in the belly of the sea-creature for three days and three nights is "Type" of the burial of Christ and the burial of Christ is an "antitype" of the Jonah event. The clearest usage of the Greek word Tupos in this sense is seen in Romans 5:14 where the Scripture declares that Adam "is a figure (tupos) of him that was to come", which is Christ.

While Tupos is the main Greek word related to typology, there are a few more Greek words that are related to it. For example, in Colossians 2:17 we see the word SKIA which is translated as "Shadow". A few things from the Old Testament are said to be a "shadow" of things to come (Hebrews 8:5, 10:1)

Another related word is HUPODEIGMA and it is translated as "copy" and is used in relation to shadow in Hebrews 8:5 (compare with 9:23). The word PARABOLE used in Hebrews is translated as "a figure for present time" (Hebrews 9:9, 11:19) is also related to the idea of Types.

Origen Was An Alexandrian Church Father
Who Introduced Numerous
Erroneous Teachings Into The Church

A special word related to Types is ANTITUPON (Hebrews 9:24, 1 Peter 3:21) which refers to the reality in New Testament which is denoted by its Old Testament Type. It is what we call today as anti-type.

Thus the concept of Types is a rich and varied one in the New Testament, and a careful study of this concept would be helpful -- particularly in devotional aspects of one's ministry of Bible exposition.

The New Testament picks up a large number of persons and events from the Old Testament and presents them as types or predictions (prophecies) for New Testament times. Thus Types and Typology have a thoroughly biblical basis and are derived from the Bible itself. Thus typology is a legitimate part of Bible interpretation, exposition, and homiletics. At the same time, it is also the single most misused type of interpretation and one should have a good idea of proper and improper typology if one is to use it within the right boundaries in one's ministry.

History of Typology: Typology is a figurative way of communication. It started in the Old Testament where God frequently used figurative communication. Tabernacle is a good example. However, Typology as we see it today has its origin in the New Testament where many Old Testament persons, places, objects, and events are mentioned as Types of New Testament truths. As a result, the first-century church used Typology as part of Bible interpretation in all Bible teaching. However, soon a generation rose that was not sufficiently grounded in the Old Testament, and Typology lost its biblical moorings.

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The New Testament church started with Jews who were baptized by the Holy Spirit. The majority of believers in the immediately following years came to the church from the Jewish fold. Thus there was a continuity and uniformity of thinking and understanding of theology that was firmly based in the Old Testament. However, as the New Testament missionary enterprise spread, a large number of gentiles joined the fold.

Many of these gentile-converts were good at communication skills and very soon became popular and dominant teachers in the young church. Unfortunately, most of them had no background in the Bible, Bible-doctrine, or biblical methods of interpretation. As a result, many of them opted for the easier path of Typology instead of the biblical path of rightly dividing the word of Truth. The former required very little work whereas the latter required one to spend hours studying the Scripture. The exigencies of the

circumstances in the first century -- social boycott, cultural conflicts, persecution -- aided the situation where one had to deliver sermons and Bible classes without much preparation. Thus imaginative Typology dominated their teaching ministry, and soon this imagination-based Typology degenerated into Allegory.

Ambrose, A Powerful Teacher, Intoduced Many Errors Into Theology
[Image Credit: Wiki Commons]

Typology is legitimate interpretation of Old Testament Types, such as the sacrificial lamb in Old Testament which is represented in the anti-type Christ. Such interpretation is strictly controlled by the New Testament in that only those persons, things, or events clearly identified by the New Testament as Types are used as Types by the Bible interpreter. He keeps in mind that Typological interpretation of a given passage is not its primary meaning and therefore stresses the primary meaning and then explains it as a Type of a New Testament Truth. However, once Typology degenerates into Allegory, the primary meaning is forgotten and fancy figurative meanings are substituted as the primary meaning and intent of a given Old Testament passage.

Thus when the Old Testament says that one is allowed to eat only those animals that chew the cud and who have divided hooves, the allegorists totally overlook the literal meaning. They then say that this is the picture of a true believer who meditates day and night upon the Scriptures (chews the cud) and who has dual heavenly-earthly citizenship (divided hoof). There is no rule of grammar or interpretation that guides or reins in this kind of interpretation. Rather, it is a free-for-all type of interpretation of the Bible where the primary meaning is totally ignored and fancy meanings are substituted. Worse, the more fancy and appealing a given interpretation is, the more "deep" it is considered due to its appeal to the emotions of the listeners. In this manner Bible-based Typology soon degenerated into an imagination-based enterprise that was controlled only by carnal minds of highly imaginative people. Scripture became a comedy in their Hands, and the curse of it endures even today.

Very soon Alexandria became a center of Christian learning. Here Greek philosophy freely mingled with the thought of Christian theology due to the influence of Christian theologians like Philo who were heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. Even Platonic concepts were borrowed and mixed with Christian theology. Under their influence the literal nature of the Old Testament was abandoned and the whole of it was projected as an allegory.

Philo Of Alexandria

Very influential teachers like Origen, Hilary of Poitiers, and Ambrose became the promoters of Allegorical interpretation of the Bible. Saint Augustine was also influenced by them. Ambrose, under the influence of pagan philosophies, kept teaching that "letter kills, but the spirit gives life". To him, the historical-literal meaning of the Scripture was the letter that killed and the "spiritualized" meaning of that letter (allegory)

was spirit that gave life. Such a distortion of the meaning of the Scripture gave a free reign to Bible teachers in that generation and the following generations to allegorize the Scripture as per their pagan philosophies and also as per the wishes and whims of the carnal mind. As mentioned earlier, the more a person was skilled at fancy weaving of strange ideas, the more skilled he was considered in presenting "deep truths" of the Scripture. This eventually displaced the teaching of truth with teaching of human inventiveness.

The Middle Ages saw a renewal of interest in Typology and Allegory. Since Allegory had a long time ago replaced Typology, it would be more accurate to say that Middle Ages saw a rise of great interest in Allegory. This very seriously influenced Bible interpretation in the Protestant churches because though the Reformation came out of Roman Catholic Church, this did not result in a total break with the past -- particularly in the way interpreters handled the Bible.

The rise of smaller revival movements in the 1800s and 1900s brought in a great revival of legitimate Typology but it quickly degenerated into anarchical Allegory. The ecclesiastical structure of these movements is responsible for this anarchy. In denominational churches most preaching is done by seminary-trained men, most of whom follow principles of homiletics to a reasonable degree. Further, the passage that they need to select and the interpretation they need to offer to the congregation is often given to them in advance by central coordinating bodies. Thus their interpretation remains within the boundaries dictated by a centralized directive. Even in churches that do not send sermon-outlines to the pastors in advance, they tend to remain within well-defined hermeneutic and homiletic boundaries. While this usually quenches the Spirit of God from communicating via these men, at the same time this prevents runaway interpretations that are seen in newer revivalist and separatist churches. This accounts for the relative absence of runaway allegory in those churches.

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The newer revivalist and separatist churches tend to have no hierarchy, or a loose-knit hierarchy. People are appointed to the pulpit as ministers with minimum or no theological training or apprenticeship. Formal training tends to be an exception rather than rule. As a result, a good number of them lack hermeneutic and homiletic skills that can keep them within legitimate boundaries. Also, since a good number of them have not been trained formally or apprenticed, they tend to take their task of preaching much more easily or informally -- not backed up with a thorough or systematic study of the Scripture. This breach in essential discipline eventually leads them to the easy course of Typology, and eventually to the much more easy course of allegory.

There is a second and more serious problem with these churches. Many of these churches encourage untrained believers to preach and teach with the same authority as the trained ones. While formal training is not necessary, self-discipline in studying the scripture is definitely necessary. However, barring exceptions, most of these so-called lay-preachers lack the time, commitment, and discipline to study the Bible systematically. Many of them do not know the fundamental doctrines or God's plan of ages. They have not been through Bible surveys. Thus the passages of Scripture are only

disjoint and discreet narrations for them, something like disjoint pieces of a puzzle, and they are not able to relate them to each other. For them it is not a whole picture, but only disjoint pieces of a large picture-puzzle. It is not the picture that brings in meaning, but rather their imagination that attributes meaning to each individual piece. As a result, instead of viewing the Scripture as a united whole, they try to attribute meaning to individual passages, and the Scripture immediately becomes another human book. This also forces them to read figurative meanings into those passages, which takes them quickly through the Typology to the Allegory trap. As a result, the Typological and Allegorical anarchy is seen most commonly in this kind of churches, with everyone in the pulpit given the freedom to say anything, as long as it "spiritually" entertains the audience.

The ultimate result is interpretational anarchy, with a free run of human imagination. The Scriptural truths are lost very early in this jungle. Unless the situation is redeemed and corrected by those who have a burden for the church, the present-day Bible-believing churches will continue to degenerate due to lack of solid meat of the Scripture.

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Legitimate Typology: Though Typology tends to degenerate fast into interpretation anarchy, it can offer much devotional material if it is kept within the Biblical boundaries. The most important precaution is to look to the Scripture itself for the use of Typology. As soon as we do that, we will notice that all Old Testament Types have their corresponding Anti-types mentioned in the New Testament. Thus the mention of an object as a Type, and the presence of Anti-types is essential before a biblical truth can be presented as a Type.

This rules out a good number of imaginary and imaginative Types that all kinds of preachers have invented to make their messages juicy and attractive. For example, once this biblical stipulation is obeyed, the Song of Solomon cannot be interpreted as a Type of Christ and the Church because the Church is a mystery that does not exist in the Old Testament in any form, including prophetic form.

Legitimate use of Typology also demands that one depend upon the Bible to identify Types instead of inventing them based upon human wisdom. It also demands that things for which Anti-types do not exist in the Bible should not be presented as Types. A good example is the donkey on which Jesus rode to Jerusalem. Many preachers interpret the legs of the donkey as bible-study, prayer, fellowship, and breaking of bread. This is an illegitimate interpretation of the Scripture, and is totally wrong as a Type. On the contrary, this is an allegorical interpretation that has no biblical basis.

Legitimate use of Typology demands further that one should not go into every minute detail of everything that might serve as a Type. For example, though the Lamb of Sacrifice in the Old Testament is a type of Lamb of God in the New Testament, the similarity ends here. The Bible expositor should not try to attribute Typical meaning to every organ of the lamb. Such detailed

similarity does not occur in biblical Typology, and one should not force such an alien interpretation upon the Bible.

The above-mentioned kind of erroneous interpretation is seen most often in the case of Tabernacle. Since people always love listening to speculation, because speculation does not address them and their lives directly in any way, exaggerated interpretation of the Tabernacle has become a rule over the years. Worse, not only is this exaggerated interpretation totally alien to Scripture, it is not Typology but rather unbiblical allegory.

Precautions In The Use Of Typology: Typology is a legitimate part of biblical communication. Thus it is controlled by well-known, well-defined, and strict principles of Biblical interpretation and one should take care to remain within those legitimate boundaries.

a. Types Are History-based Persons, Events, Or Things: Types are based in history. In the New Testament God the Holy Spirit uses real persons, actual events, and real things from the Old Testament as Types of their corresponding New Testament Anti-types (fulfillment). This means that Persons, Events, Things, Stories, or Figurative Speech that is found first in the New Testament are not to be used as Types. New Testament is a place for Anti-types and not Types. The donkey on which Jesus rode is not a Type of the Church and the Bread and Vine of communion is not a Type of Christ. The donkey was a real donkey, and the elements of communion are "Symbols" of the sacrificial work of Christ, not Types of Christ.

b. Old Testament Types Are Fulfilled In New Testament: Old Testament Types conveyed New Testament truths to Old Testament believers in a very primitive form. Thus if information about something does not exist in the Old Testament (such as Church), then no Old Testament Person, Event, or Thing can represent a New Testament truth. Therefore Songs of Solomon does not contain any Typical information about the Church.

c. Anti-type Make Types Totally Clear: Old Testament Types communicated biblical truths to Old Testament believers in an elementary form while Anti-types make those subjects highly clear in the New Testament. Thus a presumed Old Testament Type is not really a Bible-based Type if a clear-cut Anti-type does not exist in the New Testament. A forced or accidental correspondence between OT and NT are not sufficient to claim an OT object to be a Type.

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d. Non-essentials Should Be Kept Away: Types and Anti-types never match fully in all detail, nor are they meant to match that way. Thus there should be no attempt to match each and everything in a given type with the anti-type. Since no such match exists or can be found, the result of such forced interpretation would be a quick lapse of the interpretation into unbiblical allegory. For example, while Jonah in the belly of the sea-monster represents the burial of Christ, one should not try to match other details of the story with Christ -- for human imagination will quickly fill in details which are not biblical.

Biblically Well-defined Types: A large number of Old Testament Types and their Anti-types are mentioned in the New Testament. These can be called the Biblically Well-defined Types because the Bible interpreter has the authority of the Scripture itself in identifying and interpreting these types. Bible teachers should preferably keep their Typological messages preferably to these Types alone for the sake of accuracy and reliability. The following are some of these well-defined Types.

1. OT Persons As NT Types: The New Testament identifies many individuals from the Old Testament as Types. The Bible-teacher should take special precaution to remember and teach that ONLY a few characteristics of Types and Anti-types match and that trying to match more than what is legitimate would immediately result in reading into the Bible what is not there. Persons mentioned in NT as OT Types include:

- Melchizedek, who was both king of Salem and a priest of God at the same time (Genesis 14:18-20), is mentioned as a Type of Christ. One should keep in mind that he is a very very limited Type of Christ based upon selective interpretation of certain passages (Hebrews 5:5-10; 6:20; 7:1-17).
- Moses was both a prophet as well as a priest for God's people. He was also their leader (king) and mediator. In these things he was a type of Christ (Acts 3:22; 1 Corinthians 10:2; Galatians 3:27; 3:19; 1 Timothy 2:5).

2. OT Places As NT Types: A number of Old Testament places have been identified in the NT as Types of one thing or other. As said earlier, we should be cautious not to read more than what the NT indents by these identifications. Some of these places are:

- Egypt represents a state of bondage similar to the bondage of a sinner before he comes to Christ (Galatians 4:2; Romans 6:17; 1 Corinthians 10:1...)
- Jerusalem or Zion is remotely identified as a Type of the household of God (Galatians 4:25, 26; Hebrews 12:22; Revelation 21:2).
- Babylon, since it held God's people captive, is represented as a Type of an apostate church that has departed from the simplicity of the New Testament pattern (Revelation 11:8; 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2ff).

3. OT Things As NT Types: The New Testament identifies many Old Testament things as Types, though often this is done only remotely. Some of these are:

- The Ladder seen by Jacob (Genesis 28:12) in his dream is identified as a picture of Christ (John 1:51) who provides communication from God the Father (John 1:18, Hebrews 1:1-2) and access to heaven (John 14:6).
- The Brazen Serpent that was lifted up in the wilderness to save people from physical death (Numbers 21:80) has been identified as a Type of Christ (John 3:14, 12:32) unto whom people can look in faith and gain salvation from spiritual death.
- Tabernacle is the most popular and most common Type mentioned in the New Testament and also taught that way in the Church. (Hebrews 6:19, 20; 9:8, 24). When teaching about the Tabernacle, the Bible interpreter should keep in mind not to go beyond legitimate interpretation because this one subject where much interpretation excess and anarchy prevails.

4. OT Events as NT Types: A number of OT events have been identified as NT Types, and within the boundaries set by the Bible these are good to remind us of God's hand in human history. Some of these events are:

- The flood at the time of Noah (Genesis 6 to 8) has been mentioned as a Type of the sudden destruction that the world is going to face in future (Matthew 24: 37-39).
- Water that came out miraculously from the smitten rock (Exodus 17:6) has been mentioned as a Type of the water of life provided by the smitten Lord Jesus (John 4:14, 1 Corinthians 10:4).

There is great need for care in using Typological teaching because, of all the methods of Bible interpretation, Typology is the one most susceptible to misinterpretation. So much so that the average Typological preaching today tends to have more error than truth in it.

Summary: Typology is a legitimate part of Bible interpretation. The Scripture itself identifies Typology as a way in which God has communicated divine truths. Thus every Bible student should study Types as an essential part of Bible Interpretation. At the same time, he should take care to remain within the confines of interpretation as is seen in the New Testament.

There is great need for care in using Typological teaching because, of all the methods of Bible interpretation, Typology is the one most susceptible to misinterpretation. So much so that the average Typological preaching today tends to have more error than truth in it.

The greatest problem with Typology is that it quickly lapses into allegory, and then allegorical anarchy. Since one needs only a fertile mind to introduce allegory into one's teaching/preaching, those who despise self-discipline and dependence upon the Holy Spirit for understanding/teaching the Scripture are most prone to allegorical misinterpretation. We need to strenuously avoid such disintegration of our teaching ministries.

Select Bibliography: Biblical Hermeneutics has generated a large number of books, technical and popular, in the last two millennia. The best ones are not always available, and what is easily available might not always be the best work. Thus this selected bibliography is given here with annotations so that you might be able to search for some of these good works in this field, particularly in relation to biblical Typology.

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Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation.* Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950. (Berkhof has been a favourite among conservative Christians because of his balanced treatment whether it be his systematic theology or his hermeneutics).

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metaphorical language in the Bible. The book should be read with the understanding that the author is not strictly evangelical in his commitment to the Bible).

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Walter C. Kaiser, *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New.* Chicago: Moody Press, 1985. (Any serious study of Typology is incomplete without this book, though it does not deal directly with Typology).

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D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995.(A very useful work for students of Typology).

About The Authors

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Come, Let Us Go Back To The Bible!

Please Join The Mission of Brethren Research Group

Every reform movement comes to slumber in a century or less. There are practically no exceptions in the last two millinnia of church history. Thus each generation needs Ezras and Nehemiahs to rebuild the foundations that were once laid down but which are in ruins now! The only solution is to go back to the Bible and its fundamentals.

The authors stand unashamedly and without wavering on the following fundamental principles: Bible Alone (Sola Scriptura), Faith Alone (Sola Fide), Grace Alone (Sola Gratia), Christ Alone (Solus Christus). With this in mind we bring to you a set of writers who stand strong on these principles.

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